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4 The peril of potential

Gender practices in the recruitment and selection of early career researchers

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Introduction

Despite efforts to reduce gender inequality in European academia, figures show that the number of women researchers is still disproportionately lower at every step of the academic career ladder than the number of men researchers (EU 2016). Previous research on gender in academia has demonstrated that various practices in academia are causing this gender inequality, such as the masculine organisation of academia (Teelken and Deem 2013), academic networking (Van den Brink and Benschop 2014), a lack of role models and informal support systems for women (Bagilhole and Goode 2001), the substantial allocation of academic housework to women (Heijstra *et al.* 2016), and the way academic excellence is constructed (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a).

The studies that analysed how the perpetuation of gender disparities is imbued in the rhetoric of meritocracy have shown the crucial role played by recruitment and selection practices at full professor level (Van den Brink 2010; Van den Brink *et al.* 2010; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a). However, gender practices in the recruitment and selection have hitherto not been studied for the early stages of the academic career. We argue that it is important to fill this void as the specific characteristics of the early academic career stage, such as the growing number of precarious positions (Wöhler 2014) and the more equal gender balance among junior staff (EU 2016), point to the relevance of examining gender practices in this phase. The recruitment and selection processes for assistant professors need more scrutiny as these early career researchers find themselves in strong competition for relatively scarce positions (Nikunen 2014). Yet, we do not know how gender plays a role in who wins or loses in this competition, but we do see that the numbers of women drop at the level of assistant professor (EU 2016). Therefore, a critical analysis of the recruitment and selection of early career researchers is needed in order to understand how gender inequalities are constructed.

In this chapter, we apply a practice approach, which enables us to study gender as a social and relational construction (Poggio 2006). We will examine the gendering process of evaluating assistant professor candidates, an endeavour

mainly carried out by the academic elite. We draw on unique information from a qualitative study on gatekeepers across six European countries and reveal how gender practices emerge in the construction of selection criteria when gatekeepers discuss their recruitment and selection practices.

The aim of this study is to contribute to theory on gender in academic organisations by showing which gender practices characterise the evaluation of candidates' potential for assistant professor positions with a prospect of a more permanent contract. We draw on empirical material of recruitment and selection procedures and criteria, such as job descriptions, HR documents, interviews and focus groups with selection committee members both in social sciences and humanities (SSH) departments and in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) departments of six European higher education institutions. A critical comparative analysis of the data resulted in the identification of two general gender practices in the recruitment and selection of assistant professors: welcoming women and assessing potential for excellence. Additionally, we find that the two general gender practices are composed of six specific gender practices. Our analysis shows that for early career researchers, judgements are based on potential instead of long track records of academic performance. We provide insight into the way the 'ideal assistant professor' is constructed, and how gender inequalities are ingrained in criteria such as excellence, international mobility and academic citizenship.

Precarious academic positions

Today's academic labour market is characterised by precariousness in employment, referring to high employment insecurity and possibly low wages (Campbell and Price 2016). Spurred by financial incentives, many European countries produce more PhDs than the academic labour market can accommodate (Cyranoski *et al.* 2011) as numbers of academic positions stagnate or decline (Fiske 2011). As a result, permanent positions, job security and career prospects are increasingly rare in the neoliberal academy, and early career researchers are faced with strong competition for scarce jobs (Nikunen 2014; Morgan and Wood 2017). An increase in temporary contracts throughout European universities is found (Wöhler 2014), for example fixed term contracts and hourly paid contracts (Bryson 2004). The focus of this chapter is on non-tenured assistant professor positions.

The temporality of fixed term assistant professorships (sometimes on a tenure-track) generally involves the principle of 'up or out', which substantially prolongs the probationary period post-PhD and constitutes the risk of a negative evaluation (Schiewer and Jehle 2014). Furthermore, such precarious academic positions are intended to form "a bridge to more secure employment, but universities across the world are growing the casual workforce to the point where the prospects of a stable academic career are becoming more and more remote" (Morgan and Wood 2017, p. 86). The potential impact of precarious work can differ across individuals and societies (Campbell and Price 2016), but also across

academic systems (see Chapter 2, in this volume), for example in terms of a degeneration of career structures (Bryson 2004), lack of access to employment conditions and opportunities (Harney *et al.* 2014), and a declining desirability of academic positions (Huisman *et al.* 2002). Precariousness in academia also shows a gendered division, with more women employed on fixed term contracts than men and a higher likelihood of women to remain on such contracts (Bryson 2004). Yet, Bryson (2004) found that for both women and men it is difficult to make “the transition from researcher on [a fixed term contract] to a more secure post” (p. 198). In this chapter, we uncover which gender practices play a part in evaluating candidates’ potential for precarious positions with a prospect of a more permanent contract.

Recruitment, selection and gender practices

Recruitment and selection practices determine who get access to assistant professor positions. Recruitment is the process concerned with attracting suitable candidates (Newell 2005) and selection is the process of choosing one candidate out of the pool of candidates based on (predefined) criteria (Van den Brink 2010) and based on the ‘fit’ between the individual and the job. Members of the dominant academic elite play a critical part in both the recruitment and selection of candidates. Previous studies on gender and academic recruitment have shown the importance of examining what gender practices are at play ‘at the gate’, where researchers are allowed or denied entrance (Van den Brink 2010; Van den Brink *et al.* 2010; Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a; Van den Brink and Benschop 2014; Nielsen 2015; O’Connor and O’Hagan 2015). However, as most studies concern higher positions in the academic hierarchy, we know little about the gender practices that affect the recruitment and selection of early career researchers, such as non-tenured assistant professors.

Studying gatekeeping at the early stages of the academic career is particularly interesting because in this phase is decided who are included or excluded from (precarious) positions with a prospect of a more permanent contract, and eventually a career in academia. A few studies note that the assessment of potential plays a role in the evaluation of researchers (Van Arensbergen *et al.* 2014; O’Connor and O’Hagan 2015), particularly for early career researchers (Bazeley 2003) who have recently entered the academic labour market. To identify “those who are researchers of promise” is primarily a subjective endeavour (Bazeley 2003, p. 271). Subjectivity tends to come with gender practices and therefore the recruitment and selection of assistant professors need further scrutiny. Studies in social psychology that focus on cognitive bias in the evaluation of men and women have shown, for example, that male students are evaluated as more competent for a position (Moss-Racusin *et al.* 2012) and that men are favoured in hiring decisions (Biernat and Fiegen 2001). What these studies do not show is how these biases become manifest in the construction of recruitment and selection criteria and the assessment of a candidate’s potential to meet those criteria. Therefore, we will study how committee members practice gender when

constructing recruitment and selection criteria for assistant professorships, where the potential of early career researchers is evaluated.

Our point of departure is the conviction that “workplaces are infused with gender” (Martin 2003, p. 343). We use the notion of gender practices to grasp the practices that happen in action and on many organisational levels (Martin 2003). We define gender practices as “the intentional or unintentional and often un-reflexive way of distinguishing between women and men, femininity and masculinity” in daily work situations (Van den Brink 2010, p. 24). Central to the practice approach is the notion that “social life is an on-going production and thus emerges through people’s recurrent actions” (Feldman and Orlikowski 2011, p. 1240). In line with Dick and Nadin (2006), we argue that selection criteria and their meaning are socially constructed in ways that mirror the interests of a particular group, which can produce inequalities for other groups, notably women. Therefore, selection criteria are not neutral, but defined and interpreted in a certain context (Dick and Nadin 2006). The framework of gender practices will help to uncover gatekeepers’ gendered constructions of selection criteria in the recruitment and selection practices for non-tenured assistant professor positions.

Methods

Data

The research for this chapter is based on a qualitative study conducted in six higher education institutions involved in the GARCIA project. The national research reports written by the six research teams that comprise the primary data we used for our analysis are part of a larger data set collected during the course of the GARCIA project. Each research team wrote a research report that centred on formal and applied criteria in the recruitment and selection of early career researchers for academic positions (Herschberg *et al.* 2015) and a report that centred on gender practices in the recruitment and selection of early career researchers (Herschberg *et al.* 2016). Our analysis is mostly based on the research reports that focus on gender practices in recruitment and selection. In addition, every research team made summaries in English of all interviews and focus groups they had conducted. These summaries were written to provide the authors with primary data to strengthen the analysis.

The national research reports are based on various data sources. All data – that are comparable across institutions in the six countries – have been collected in one SSH and one STEM department per institution. Previous studies have shown how SSH and STEM subfields vary considerably with regard to the gender compositions of students and staff, career patterns, recruitment and selection practices (Van den Brink 2010) as well as gender practices (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012b). The data consisted of documents such as university policy documents, HR documents, job postings, and appointment reports, published in the period 2010–2014. All six research teams collected these documents,

dependent on the availability in their institution. Furthermore, in 2014 every research team conducted semi-structured interviews and focus groups with selection committee members (hereafter committee members). The interview and focus group participants were selected because they had taken part in a hiring committee that was involved in the recruitment and selection of at least one temporary (tenure-track) assistant professor in the period 2010–2014. To ensure comparability, every team used the same interview guide for the interviews. Interviews were based on three themes: selection criteria for assistant professor positions, a selection process in which the research participants had taken part, and department policies regarding recruitment and selection of early career researchers. Interviews were conducted with 47 men and women committee members and five focus groups with 35 men and women committee members. In total 55 men and 27 women participated in this study. The majority of our research participants (two thirds) are men. This reflects the number of men on selection committees in the countries of this study. We find in our data that decision-making power regarding the appointment of assistant professors mainly lies in the hands of male researchers. The majority of committee members as well as the committee members in powerful positions (e.g. the chair of the committee) are men. Even though the skewed division of men and women among our research participants reflects the current situation in selection committees for assistant professor positions, it could have influenced our findings. See Table 4.1 for more information on the research participants.

The interviews and focus groups were recorded with participants' permission and transcribed verbatim. Thus, our data are primarily textual accounts that allow us to capture detailed accounts of recruitment and selection practices. It is in these accounts that we found multiple gender practices. Ideally, we would have gathered observational data as well, to be able to capture the practices in the doing. Unfortunately, we were denied access to actual recruitment and selection processes in all but one country because of privacy and confidentiality concerns.

Data analysis

The research reports of the GARCIA teams were centred on recruitment and selection of early career researchers including both postdocs and assistant professors. For this chapter we focused on the sections of the research report that involved the research findings on assistant professor positions. We applied thematic coding as a method for analysing our data (Flick 2009). We first read the research reports on gender in recruitment and selection and open coded the texts. We produced short descriptions of each 'case' (national report) according to the themes in the reports (Flick 2009): 'context', 'power in the recruitment and selection of assistant professors in the STEM department', 'power in the recruitment and selection of assistant professors in the SSH department', 'gender in the recruitment and selection of assistant professors in the STEM department', and 'gender in the recruitment and selection of assistant professors in the SSH

Table 4.1 Number of male and female interview and focus group participants per country and department

Country	SSH interviews		STEM interviews		SSH focus group		STEM focus group		Combined STEM-SSH focus group	
	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F	M	F
Iceland (IS)	4	1	1	3	3	2	2	1	–	–
Slovenia (SO)	2	2	2	1	2	2	3	2	–	–
Belgium (BE)	3	2	3	0	–	–	–	–	2	3
Switzerland (CH)	3	1	2	1	4	2	–	–	–	–
Italy (IT)	4	1	2	0	–	–	–	–	–	–
The Netherlands (NL)	2	2	5	0	2	1	4	0	–	–
Total	18	9	15	5	11	7	9	3	2	3

department'. This way, the central topics documented in the reports were summarised. Next, we compared the different 'cases', which revealed many similar recruitment and selection practices and gender practices (e.g. international mobility, gender stereotypes). We then deepened our analysis by applying selective coding through rereading all reports and looking for "further examples and evidence for relevant categories" (Flick 2009, p. 312) regarding gender practices. At all times the cases (national reports) were compared. This resulted in a thematic structure of the gender practices found in the research reports. After multiple deliberations between the authors we ended up with two general gender practices, composed of six specific gender practices (see Table 4.2 for an overview). Selected passages of the research reports as well as interview quotes were analysed in greater detail. Repeatedly, we went back to the original research reports as well as the interview and focus group summaries to get additional information needed for our analysis. Our findings are illustrated with quotes from the interviews. The participant's country (see Table 4.1 for country abbreviations), department (SSH or STEM) and sex are provided. Quotes were translated into English by the respective research teams.

In the remaining part of the chapter we will use country names instead of the names of the participating institutions to facilitate reading. For example, when we refer to Switzerland, we refer to the participating institution in Switzerland. Also, we will use the terminology "SSH department" and "STEM department" in reference to the various departments in the six higher education institutions. See Table 4.1 for more information on the participating countries and the country abbreviations.

Research context

Even though the proportion of women academics in assistant professor positions is more than double the proportion of women on full professorships in the EU-28 countries, we already see a decrease in the proportion of women academic staff from postgraduate/post-PhD positions to assistant professor positions (EU 2016). This decrease is also visible in the countries included in this study (see Table 4.3).

A general tendency of Western governments has been to decrease the amount of public money spent on public services (De Boer *et al.* 2007) and the direct

Table 4.2 Overview of general gender practices and specific gender practices

<i>General gender practices</i>	<i>Specific gender practices</i>
Welcoming women	Women contribute to the working environment Role models
Assessing potential for excellence	Confidence Commitment International mobility Academic citizenship

Table 4.3 Proportion of female academic staff by grade, 2013

<i>Country</i>	<i>Grade D</i>	<i>Grade C</i>
Iceland (IS)	—	51.2
Slovenia (SO)	52.6	45.5
Belgium (BE)	48.3	35.8
Switzerland (CH)	41.5	38.5
Italy (IT)	50.3	45.4
The Netherlands (NL)	45.6	37.8

Source: EU 2016.

Note

Grade C represents assistant professors, Grade D represents either postgraduate students not yet holding a PhD degree who are engaged as researchers (on the payroll) or researchers working in posts that require a PhD.

investments in higher education. All universities in our study have been confronted with decreasing budgets, except for the Swiss university. In Slovenia, budget cuts have been so severe that professors have to fund part of their own position by acquiring external funding. In all universities in our study there is an increasing pressure on academic staff to obtain external research funding. Particularly for postdocs, this funding is needed to sustain their employment, often leading to an accumulation of multiple precarious contracts. At the same time, successfully obtaining external funding is increasingly becoming a selection criterion for academics, also at the early career stages. In Switzerland and in the Dutch STEM department, having obtained a grant is a selection criterion for tenure-track assistant professors positions. This not only signals a difference in selection criteria between the various countries but also a difference regarding academic maturity of candidates for assistant professorships. In Switzerland, Italy and the Dutch STEM department, candidates for assistant professor positions are expected to have obtained years of (postdoc) experience before going into a track that gives prospects for a more permanent position. This is in contrast to other countries and departments where early career researchers can apply for an assistant professorship right after their PhD or after fewer years of postdoc employment.

Decreasing university budgets also have an effect on the availability of tenure-track positions. Particularly in Italy and Slovenia, the number of available positions that may become permanent in the long run is extremely low. Yet, in all countries we find increasing numbers of PhD and postdoc positions but stagnating or declining numbers of assistant professor positions. As a result, the competition for assistant professorships is high and the pressure on appointed candidates to succeed tremendous.

Recruitment and selection procedures

We briefly describe the committee composition and recruitment and selection procedures in the institutions that are part in this study to provide some context.

In Belgium, the recruitment and selection of assistant professors follows university policy that comprises a four-stage process. The first stage involves advertising the vacancy for the position. Then, all the applications are collected and sent to the selection committee appointed by the Executive Board. The second stage involves the selection. Each committee member makes a shortlist with applicant(s) they would like to interview, followed by the actual interviews. Then, the first ranked candidate is nominated for the position. In the third stage the Executive Board confirms the selection. The fourth and final stage is when the Board of Governors and then the Board of Trustees confirm the appointment.

In Iceland the selection procedure for assistant professor positions takes place in three stages, as determined by university policy. First, the position is publicly advertised and the applications are collected. Second, an evaluation committee evaluates if candidates fulfil the minimum requirements for the position. This committee consists of three members, two members appointed by the university council and one specialist appointed by the faculty. The evaluation committee evaluates candidates after which the applications of qualified candidates are sent to the selection committee. Third, the selection committee makes the final decision on who is going to be suggested for the position. The selection committee consists of five members: the head of the faculty who is also the chair of the committee, one standing member appointed by the faculty, two specialists appointed by the faculty, and one Rector's representative. The role of the Rector's representative is to make sure that rules and regulations (also the Gender equality law) are followed.

In Italy, the selection procedure for assistant professors is formalised. It initially involves a public announcement, followed by the appointment of a committee composed of three full or associate professors: one selected by the university, one by the department concerned, and one by the university recruitment committee. At least one member must be from another university. The STEM and SSH department differ in their recruitment approach in the sense that external networks (national and international) are more important in the STEM department, whereas the SSH department relies more on internal networks and membership of specific groups. Several evaluation phases follow after recruitment: a pre-selection consisting of a comparative evaluation of qualifications, CVs and three reference letters; the advice of three external referees appointed by the university recruitment committee; the consequent admission to the next phase where at least six candidates are interviewed. At the end of the interview phase the committee makes a ranking. Then, the department council deliberates on the candidate who will be nominated for the post. The council takes account of the committee's evaluation, although this is not binding.

In the Netherlands, the selection process for an assistant professor starts when a position becomes vacant. A job description is created based on the tasks the assistant professor has to conduct. When composing the selection committee, the main tasks the assistant professor will have to fulfil are taken into account. For example, the coordinator of bachelor programme will take part in the committee when the assistant professor has to do a lot of teaching in the bachelor

programme. Also, policy prescribed that the committee should have a least one woman member with a position comparable to the one in the vacancy. After the committee has been installed, the job description is advertised on academic job websites and distributed via mailing lists. When all letters of application have come in, the committee makes a short list of candidates to interview, either via e-mail or during a face-to-face meeting. Based on interviews with shortlisted candidates, committee members evaluate the candidates and decide on the preferred candidate. Next, they write an appointment report, which is an advice to the faculty board. Then, the faculty board decides on the final appointment.

In the Slovenian SSH department, the Scientific Council of the Institute serves as the selection committee for research fellows (equivalent of assistant professor). These positions fall under the promotion system in which candidates who meet the official criteria are promoted, but candidates who do not meet the criteria are rejected. In the Slovenian STEM department the procedure for recruiting and selecting assistant professors is slightly different. After candidates have submitted their applications, the secretary of the human resources office and the secretary of the department review the candidates' CVs. The candidates who do not meet the official criteria are rejected, while others are invited to an interview with the committee members. The selection committee should consist of three members, one of which from an institution outside the university. Usually the members from the faculty are the associate dean or/and the head of the departmental chair and a retired professor.

In Switzerland, it is obligatory to publish assistant professor jobs on the university website. University policy insists on formal recruitment procedures. Selection criteria are explicitly left up to the employing faculty/department to determine, according to their teaching and/or research needs. For the assistant professor position the committee is composed of up to six persons (with one or two external members). During the procedure, an 'equality delegate' is present to observe the selection process, with the aim of sustaining equality. The committee members interview the shortlisted candidates and make a ranking of candidates. The Faculty Councils are free to follow the recommendations of the selection committee or to propose a new ranking of the short-listed candidates. In turn, the Rectors' Office is entitled to follow the vote of the Faculty Council, or not.

We recognise the differences in career systems and recruitment and selection practices in the countries we study. Yet, when it comes to the gender practices, we found remarkable similarities across the various institutions and contexts that will be discussed in the next section.

Findings

In this section, we present the gender practices in the evaluation of men and women candidates that we identified throughout the STEM and SSH departments in six European higher education institutions on the basis of the interviews and focus groups conducted with committee members. Two general gender practices

stand out in our data: welcoming women and assessing potential for excellence. We will show how these two gender practices are conflated with multiple specific gender practices.

Welcoming women

The first general gender practice we derived from the data is discursively welcoming women in assistant professor positions. Most research participants throughout the various countries and disciplines expressed that they are in favour of a more equal representation of men and women in the department, which in most departments entails advocating an increase in women researchers. We identified two specific gender practices pertaining to the discourse of welcoming women that all relate to the aim for a gender balance among academic staff.

One key argument for welcoming women given by committee members is numerical: the number of women staff members lags behind the number of men and this breaches the ideal of gender balance. In all countries, except for Slovenia and Italy, recruitment and selection policies prescribe that in case of equal qualification of two candidates, women are preferred over men candidates for positions in which women are underrepresented. Research participants gave two reasons for why they would like to have a gender balance in their department, which both contain specific gender practices. The first reason is because an increase in women staff is expected to positively influence the working environment.

If there are two candidates that are pretty similar, and it is not clear from the selection committee point of view who is better, then we have to take [gender] into account. If there are more men in the faculty, it strengthens it if there are more women [hired].

(IS, SSH, M)

This interviewee refers to the recruitment and selection policy in Iceland. However, he states that the assessment of quality comes first and only then “we have to take gender into account”. This practice is known in the literature as the “tie-break” selection (Noon 2012) where the “under-representation of people with certain demographic characteristics” (such as gender) is taken into account “in order to make the *final choice* between equally qualified candidates when appointing or promoting” (pp. 77–78, emphasis added). However, Swiss, Dutch, and Icelandic research participants argue that they have never seen this measure put in practice because they never consider two candidates equally qualified. We also learn from the quote that “it strengthens it if there are more women” in a faculty where men are in the majority. By saying this, he makes a very general statement about the added value of women, without explaining why more women will strengthen the department and what will be strengthened. However, it implicates that women have a special contribution to make.

A Slovenian interviewee illustrates his preference for a mix of men and women researchers in his group: “I have a very balanced working group. [...] The best solution is – and that can be seen from the communication itself – that in a big group both genders are represented” (SO, STEM, M). This committee member argues that in a “balanced working group” the “communication” is better than in a non-balanced working group. Therefore, balance is “the best solution” to him. Multiple committee members see a benefit in having more women in a group because they think this facilitates the communication and collaboration in a group. A Swiss interviewee stated: “It’s very important that there should be more women, a lot more, and that they should be completely at ease there in the way that I am at ease in science” (CH, STEM, M). The explanation he gave for his position in favour of “more women” is that women are more collaborative, something he values highly.

Welcoming women based on a generic ideal of women is what Glick and Fiske (1996) call ‘benevolent sexism’. They define this as “a set of interrelated attitudes toward women that are sexist in terms of viewing women stereotypically and in restricted roles but that are subjectively positive in feeling tone (for the perceiver)” (p. 491). Thus, the rhetoric of the committee members in our study, promoting higher numbers of women in academia, can be interpreted as well-intentioned, yet it is conflated with stereotypical perceptions of women (and men) researchers. Such stereotyping can be damaging to the receiver of benevolent sexist remarks because it can threaten the feelings of being taken seriously (Glick and Fiske 1996). It could also be damaging to women who do not fit the stereotype that is projected on them.

The second reason for wanting a more gender-balanced group is the role model argument (cf. Van den Brink and Stobbe 2014). A Dutch STEM committee member explains his positive stance towards increasing the number of women in his department:

INTERVIEWEE: And of course I have a plan. But well, if that will succeed, I don’t know! Time will tell. But one of the arguments in that plan is that I think we should hire another two women here in the department. To get a bit more of a balance. A bit! [...] I would also like fifty-fifty, yes, great! Why not?

INTERVIEWER: Why would you like that?

INTERVIEWEE: Well, because I think that is a good reflection of the balance overall in the world. It is [at this moment] a very bad reflection of the number of students that enter here.

(NL, STEM, M)

This committee member explains that he made a plan for hiring more women because he wants to get the numbers more in “balance”. So, besides discursively welcoming women, this interviewee also says that he acts upon the wish for more women in the department. Even though he explained later that reaching “fifty-fifty” in the short term will be impossible, he argues that an equal number of men and women in the department would be a better “reflection” of the world

population. He then touches upon an issue that we found more often in the STEM interviews. The interviewee argues for a gender balance among staff members because that will also better reflect the gender balance among the students in the department. Many Dutch STEM committee members make the plea for more women colleagues with the argument that women function as role models for both students and aspiring academics. They perceive role models necessary for increasing the number of women students and staff members but also for signalling to younger women that having a career in science is “a very normal career choice, also for women” (NL, STEM, M).

In summary, committee members practice gender by discursively welcoming women in their department, arguing that the number of men and women employees should be (more) balanced. They give two reasons for this welcoming stance towards women researchers, which represent two specific gender practices. The first reason is that women contribute to the department by their communication skills and collaborative behaviour. The second reason concerns the perceived need for women role models. Overall, the responses suggest that committee members are not at ease with an imbalance in men and women staff, implying that (a greater) balance is the norm. It should be noted that the interviewers and the research topic could have influenced these results, as research participants were aware that they were interviewed about gender in academia and possibly felt the need to position themselves positively towards the topic. In this section we found that research participants actively reflect on their point of view with regard to unequal numbers of men and women researchers. In the next sections we will present gender practices in the recruitment and selection of assistant professors that happen less reflexively.

Assessing potential for excellence

The second general gender practice we identified is assessing candidates for assistant professorships based on their potential for excellence. This practice is constructed around a complex interplay of four specific gender practices. We distinguish between two sets of criteria: formal criteria and tacit criteria. We start by showing the formal selection criteria used in the selection of assistant professors, followed by the tacit criteria. It is the latter category that we found most conflated with specific gender practices.

Formal selection criteria

Most research participants across countries and disciplines argue that during recruitment and selection procedures for assistant professorships they should take the junior level of candidates into account. We find that candidates for assistant professor positions are primarily assessed on three formal criteria: research, teaching and administration. Of these criteria, committee members across countries and disciplines equally argue that research is the most important selection criterion.

When it comes to the criteria for selection, the most primary and indispensable criterion is scientific excellence, which normally is reflected in the research conducted, the number of publications, type of publications, peer reviewed, what the person has actually done in previous research.

(BE, SSH, M)

For this committee member “scientific excellence” is the most important selection criterion, which to him means research and publications. However, not just any publication counts. According to this interviewee, as most interviewees in our study, publications should be in (international) “peer reviewed” journals.

Our analysis shows that committee members try to make an assessment based on formal selection criteria, however, due to the early career stage of applicants they only have a limited track record to rely on.

Publication is an indication of what the researchers are capable of doing, but evidently a young researcher is not able to publish as much as experienced ones can do. So we have to project the profile of a person and see what the person is capable of in the future.

(BE, STEM, M)

Very often they are at the end of their PhD, and I mean, sometimes they have already a publication, maybe two, depends also on the discipline. [...] Um, but very often they only have a pipeline, right? So, they have a couple of [pipeline] papers. [...] So, it's – it's on the committee to decide what they think, what this is actually worth, so to have a good understanding of the publication market, and the chances of publication – publishing something, and whether they think this pipeline – that the quality of the PhD, so to speak, of the chapters are publishable, and where, how good, how well.

(NL, SSH, M)

These committee members illustrate that, generally, candidates for assistant professor positions do not have many publications compared to more senior academics. According to the first interviewee a publication can indicate what a candidate is “capable of in the future”. The second interviewee argues that candidates for assistant professorships usually have none or just a limited number of published papers at the time of application. Therefore, he explains, the committee will look at papers in the “pipeline” and “the quality of the PhD” in order to assess the “worth” of the research in terms of the potential to get the work published in academic journals. The quote reveals that it is at the discretion of the selection committee to decide “whether they think this pipeline” is “publishable, and where, how good”. So committee members make a prediction about chances of getting the work published in the future. Most committee members confirm that a candidate's research potential can be predicted by the track record of publications, even though this track record tends to be fairly limited.

Selection committees are thus charged with the task of evaluating the potential of applicants for assistant professorships. From the data we learn that this is not a straightforward endeavour. Some committee members reflected on the difficulty of assessing potential:

Anyone can say this is a young person with good hopes. But how can I make hopes accountable and codify them?

(IT, SSH, F)

But the aim is clearly just the best scientist of that generation with, of which ... the selection committee thinks, the best potential to grow into a really good scientist. But that is really difficult to judge. So that is a very subjective process. That is absolutely clear. That is really absolutely very much constituted with all kinds of judgements, prejudices.

(NL, STEM, M)

The first interviewee acknowledges that she does not know how to measure “hopes” and implies that she struggles with applying this as a selection criterion for a “young person”. The second interviewee first argues that the aim of a selection procedure is to “just” select the “best scientist of that generation” who has “the best potential to grow into a really good scientist”. He then realises that this is not as easy as it seems and acknowledges that assessing potential is a “subjective process” inherent with various “prejudices”. Nevertheless, committee members suggest that they do not have other ways of assessing early career researchers than making predictions about their potential. Such “subjective” assessment influences if a candidate will be selected or not and can therefore have major implications for candidates.

Teaching qualities are also among the formal selection criteria for assistant professorships and thus assessed during the selection process. Again, research participants across all countries argue that candidates generally do not have much teaching experience. Therefore, committee members often evaluate the teaching qualities or potential of external candidates during a lecture or presentation that candidates have to provide during the selection process. Our data show that the criterion ‘administration’ is not assessed during selection procedures, because committee members argue that early career researchers usually do not have previous experience concerning administration.

All in all, the formal selection criteria for assistant professorships seem hard to work with because of the short track record of early career researchers. Therefore, the decision-making on whom to hire for an assistant professorship that might give a way out of precariousness in the long run, is based on a limited assessment of formal criteria, and an assessment of potential instead. Due to the short track records, committee members rely on other factors to evaluate a candidate’s suitability for the position. Our analysis reveals that multiple tacit criteria come into play when committee members discuss their preferred candidates, which give room for assumptions and subjectivities. Next, we will describe the complex interplay of gender practices found in the application of tacit criteria.

Tacit selection criteria – survival in the competitive academic world

In this section we elaborate on the four specific gender practices found in the tacit criteria committee members use to assess the potential and suitability of candidates for assistant professorships as well as academic work more generally. These practices are geared towards the assessment of candidates' potential for surviving in what research participants call 'the competitive academic world'.

Confidence. The first specific gender practice related to the general gender practice of assessing potential for excellence we found in the data is the perceived lack of confidence of women candidates. For example, interviewees in Switzerland argued that modesty and a lack of competitive behaviour of women researchers is a reason for their limited survival in what research participants argue to be 'the competitive academic world'. Modesty is often put forward as an argument for why women are expected to be unable to deal with the competitive culture in academia.

Especially in Switzerland, I find that Swiss women have a humility that ill serves them at work. This humility frankly does them no good, when they have all the potential to assert themselves. They have a very, very strong super-ego; putting oneself forward is seen as something negative.

(CH, STEM, F)

The interviewee perceives Swiss women as modest and argues that this "humility" negatively affects their work, implying that humility reduces the possibility to excel. The quote illustrates that the committee member attributes women's perceived modesty to the internalisation of gender roles ("super-ego" behaviour) and that "putting oneself forward" is considered negative, as it implies non-feminine behaviour.

We find that also during the selection procedure confidence, or the lack thereof, is something that plays a role. This reveals that tacit criteria come into play in the evaluation of candidates.

For example, it has to do with: you have to take into account, but that obviously is less and less the case, that women applicants could make a less – how do you say – assertive impression, will be less assertive. So that has to do with socialisation and the way you are.

(NL, SSH, F)

This focus group participant reproduces the common held belief that women candidates are less assertive, which she gives as an example of the way gender can play a role in recruitment and selection procedures for early career researchers. She argues that selection committees should "take into account" that women do not often make an "assertive impression" but she does not explain how to do so. It does imply that assertive behaviour is the norm and thus the preferred style. She argues that "socialisation" is to blame for women's lack of assertiveness.

Many interviewees blame women for not being confident, but they do not acknowledge that men can also lack confidence.

Research participants in the Slovenian STEM department perceive women as more obedient, patient and hardworking than men but less noticeable, ambitious and confident. According to them, it is the traditional masculine dominant, ambitious and confident attributes that facilitate climbing the academic career ladder. Van den Brink and Stobbe (2014) showed that, especially in STEM disciplines like physics, “confidence and directness are needed to demonstrate high motivation and true skills” (p. 171).

The quotes in this section show that committee members argue that gender roles and socialisation cause women to behave non-confident or non-assertive. They do not reflect on the role they themselves play in the construction of women candidates as modest or non-assertive. Particularly in STEM department, research participants explicitly put the responsibility on women. We learn that in the Slovenian STEM department almost all research participants stressed that it is the women who bear responsibility if they are not sufficiently self-confident to progress in academia. In the STEM department in Iceland an interviewee similarly puts the responsibility for gender equality on women researchers and stressed that they have to be more like men.

Across the six higher education institutions, committee members construct competition as an inherent aspect of contemporary academic work and expect excellent early career researchers to be able to deal with this competition. Because of the precarious, competitive academic environment, committee members require early career researchers to be confident, and show that confidence in the job interview. The perceptions and expectations about modest women researchers most likely negatively influence committee members’ assessment of women candidates as researchers who have the potential to make a career in academia. Moreover, committee members generally attributed non-confident behaviour to *all* women researchers and made women responsible for not ‘surviving’ in academia.

For some research participants the lack of confidence of women candidates is also connected with women’s communication style. We found that they expect of researchers a certain style of articulating ideas, which reflects a masculine, bold way of communicating.

Yes, when they come for an interview they have to just show it. Yes, then I want to just know: what drives someone? What I realise now is that there might be a gender bias there. [...] At least what I have learned is that women say what they really think to a lesser extent and less often go on thin ice. Because they are a bit more worried that they will fall through. While I can appreciate that; if someone does that in a conversation. [...] I think that men feel less embarrassed to just yell and shout it out occasionally. And by doing so they are more open to criticism, because they can have their heads chopped off. But on the other side, that gives me a better idea of what is on their mind. And I have noticed that during conversations with female stu-

dents, PhD students, and postdocs. In a longer conversation I suddenly found out. Why didn't you say that an hour ago? Yes, and if you are in a job interview that lasts one hour, yes, then it is possible that you miss the opportunity.

(NL, STEM, M)

The interviewee argues that he experienced women having another style of communicating than men during selection interviews and in regular conversations. During the interview, he realises that there can be a "gender bias" in his own evaluation of women, however, in the remaining part of the quote he continues reproducing this gender bias. So, he refers to the term 'gender bias' but he does not succeed in unpacking this bias in practice. He argues that women do not express what is on their mind whereas men are not bound by feelings of embarrassment and be explicit about their ambitions. He explains that he appreciates the communication style of men better, which shows a 'cloning' effect (Essed 2004) – the preference for candidates who behave in a similar way as committee members themselves. The interviewee perceives the way ideas are being communicated as an indicator of the quality of those ideas. Because women express their ideas more hesitantly, according to the interviewee, they could "miss the opportunity" in a selection interview that only lasts for one hour. Thus, the interviewee holds women accountable and does not think about possibly changing his own interview style during selection procedures. The non-sensitivity towards communication styles other than the ones the interviewee attributes to men can have serious consequences for women candidates during selection interviews.

Commitment. A second specific gender practice we identified is the construction of women as lacking commitment to the profession. The responses of committee members imply they perceive women as deficient for an academic career (or non-excellent) because of their supposed lack of commitment. A Swiss interviewee argues:

Generally speaking, the guys, they're ready for [pauses] I mean, you sense immediately that they're ready to work 20 hours a day [laughs], to scrub the floor, if you ask them to. [...] Usually, the women, they're more [sighs] careful, reserved.

(CH, SSH, M)

The quote shows that the committee member perceives the self-presentation of men in selection interviews as committed to do whatever it takes whereas women candidate's demeanour as "careful, reserved". He suggests that women do not display commitment to go the extra mile ("scrub the floor"). Moreover, the interviewee reproduces the long-hour rhetoric in academia by stating that men are "ready to work 20 hours a day", something that clearly appeals to the interviewee.

An interviewee in the Netherlands reported a situation in which aspiring women researchers are made insecure about the possibilities to pursue an

academic career due to the traditional masculine notion of commitment that is constantly reproduced. The following quote illustrates this:

And I think that quite more often in this kind of procedures, where women who are made insecure appear as candidates in front of a committee that consists of just or mainly men, it can go wrong. [...] One of those full professors in that committee, [...] he really lives in the fifties constructions. He comes home and the dinner is served and he does not do anything, so he can totally focus on his career. So he thinks that if you for example work part time in the end you cannot meet the written and unwritten criteria to make a career, so become an associate or full professor. And if you are confronted with such a statement, on request or not, during a job interview or a performance appraisal – what happened to me once during a conversation with him – then you think: should I just quit now, so to speak, because I do not have such a situation at home. At home we divide things or try to do that as fair as possible, so I won't be [working] 70, 80 hours, that is just not possible. So at the moment that, yes, that kind of professors with fossil ideas still take part in committees, that kind of messages are still being conveyed.

(NL, SSH, F)

This committee member illustrates how selection procedures with all men committees “can go wrong”. She argues that senior men (committee members) can make women insecure about a future career in academia because of their opinions on the impossibility of combining a career in academia with “other aspirations”. The interviewee explains how her boss expressed his opinion that a career in academia infers (more than) full time commitment to the career. Through the interviewee, the boss reinforces the prevailing notion of an excellent academic career as a profession that entails working 70 to 80 hours per week. The interviewee explains that women who cannot fulfil these “unwritten criteria” because of other obligations outside work can become insecure because of these expectations and discouraged to pursue an academic career. She argues that having men on selection committees who hold these “fossil ideas” (i.e. old fashioned ideas) can be problematic for women candidates.

A related reason given by research participants for women's perceived lack of commitment has to do with motherhood and care responsibilities. Many committee members expect an excellent researcher to be available full-time, devoted to the job and to put in long hours of work. When research participants throughout all countries talk about recruitment and selection of assistant professors, they ascribe difficulties to women early career researchers to meet these expectations, as they equal women with mothers. Most committee members seem to be convinced first of the given that all women are (future) mothers, and second of the incompatibility of motherhood and a successful academic career. An Italian interviewee explains:

A woman has an objective disadvantage, but not because we men are sexist ... in our department there's no-one like that ... but because in any case, if you have a child, you can put it how you like, but you have to do it, and this is intrinsic. So there's this disadvantage ... that if there are no proactive policies, which in Italy are not made ... in the end, simply because someone has a child and wants to be with that child ... it is clear that in the end she publishes less, travels less, because she has a two- or three-year old child ... so the only real disadvantage is structural.

(IT, STEM, M)

The interviewee points towards an “intrinsic” issue – motherhood – that he calls an “objective disadvantage”. By doing so, he constructs a disadvantage for women. First he says “because someone has a child” and then continues by using the pronoun “she”. He takes for granted that women will take care of the child and expects them to renounce part of their academic activities, such as publishing and travelling, when they are mothers. This way, he constructs women as less suitable to deal with the competition in academia and as candidates for an assistant professor position. Furthermore, he emphasises that men in his department are not “sexist”, and presents the “disadvantage” as an objective fact. Thus, the interviewee puts the responsibility on the individual woman researcher to deal with this perceived “disadvantage”. Also, he blames the lack of proactive policies for this “disadvantage”. In contrast to Italian men research participants who perceived motherhood as a hindrance to women researchers’ careers, none of the Italian women research participants made reference to it, referring instead to the gendered professional culture that characterises Italian academia as the main barrier to their advancement.

Committee members reproduced the stereotype of women as mothers who cannot dedicate sufficient time to their academic career regardless of whether or not the women in question actually had children. Since more than full time availability is expressed very often during interviews and focus groups across countries and disciplines, as something needed to build an academic career, women candidates suffer from the perceptions held by committee members about their dedication to the profession. They discursively construct women as researchers who do not have what it takes to make a career in academia. This might be even more pronounced for women at the early career stage as committee members might expect women are at a point in life where they possibly become mothers or have young children.

A committee member in Iceland argues that there is unequal distribution of unpaid work within the homes of his men and women colleagues which complicates women researchers’ entry into an academic position:

I see that family conditions are enormously important when it comes to how [academics] perform [the first years in academia]. I see it is really tough for women with children to enter a competitive academic position. I see that they are under a lot more pressure than the men [...] overall I see that [the

women] have to leave at four to pick up the kids, I see the difference how [women] have more responsibilities than the guys and this can be very difficult.

(IS, STEM, M)

This interviewee argues that women researchers who are mothers “have more responsibilities” than men researchers who are fathers. Like many other committee members, he also argues that academic work is “competitive” and states that “it is really tough for women with children” to perform the job. The committee member thus argues that mothers have difficulties dealing with competition. The expected difficulties for mothers but not for fathers are pervasive, despite the Icelandic legislation that each parent gets three months of maternity/paternity leave and three months to share among the two parents. Parenthood is only problematised for women and not for men, contributing to the precariousness of women early career researchers and not men. Committee members expect mothers to not be “100 per cent active in writing up research” (IS, SSH, F) and imply that therefore women do less well in the competition. Overall, committee members assume that motherhood will create difficulties for women assistant professors and by doing so construct women as less excellent candidates.

Furthermore, motherhood assumptions not only influence perceptions of committee members of women’s devotion to the job but also of women’s contract hours. For example, Swiss committee members in both departments expect most women to work part time. Some interviewees problematised part time work, which the following excerpt illustrates:

I know well that her [a young mother who requested to work a four-day week] productivity rate will be reduced by at least 50%. In a competitive international research context, that’s not a very good thing. I don’t really like this idea of a percentage reduction, because it just doesn’t fit in with the way work is organised. [...] I mean, people are here, they organise their experiments, and the kind of experiments we do here, they last three days, three or four days. Something like that. Once you’ve started, you just have to see it through. So that means that if we have someone who stops work on a Thursday, with an experiment that lasts three days; she’s going to start work normally on the Monday, and then after Wednesday, she’s not going to be able to do anything else, even if she’s paid until Thursday evening!

(CH, STEM, M)

This interviewee also refers to the “competitive” context in which (early career) researchers operate. Furthermore, he argues that part time work “just doesn’t fit in with the way work is organised” and thus connects full time availability with the nature of academic work. He also states that a four-day workweek, an 80 per cent appointment, will in practice lead to “at least 50%” productivity reduction and then further elaborates on his conviction that experiments cannot be done

when working part time. We learn from this that excellence and part time work are decoupled, as full time availability is the norm.

Our results corroborate earlier studies on the evaluation of academics who are also parents (Cech and Blair-Loy 2014; Herschberg *et al.* 2014). Our study shows that most committee members across the countries problematise parenthood for mothers but not for fathers. They reproduce the cultural expectation of women as main caregivers. Even though “the lived experiences of both men and women in academia may no longer match the ideal academic norm of having no care obligations” (Herschberg *et al.* 2014, p. 205) our findings show that still women researchers are predominantly expected to have care responsibilities. Research participants do not take into account that young men may face the same obstacles whilst being fathers, or that not every woman is or will be a mother. Two decades ago Bagilhole (1993) already stated that “the academic profession as it stands does not appear to accept married women with children” (p. 272). This study shows that bias against women with children still holds, but that women without children suffer from this bias too. The image of women as mothers who are involved in caring for their children is problematic as committee members imply that this creates a lack of commitment to the profession (cf. Grummell *et al.* 2009). This adds to the precariousness of women early career researchers as it evokes expectations that women are less suitable for assistant professor positions.

International mobility. A third specific gender practice we identified in the data is the gendered construction of the criterion of international mobility. Before explaining the gender practice inherent in the criterion of international mobility we will first briefly illustrate how the criterion is defined and how it is applied in selection procedures.

Our data show that committee members throughout the various countries require that young researchers go abroad for a period of time early in their careers. Even though internationalisation has become increasingly important in all countries under study, in more than half of the departments we studied, this has not led to formalised criteria with regard to international mobility. In Belgium, Slovenia, Iceland and the Dutch SSH department, international work experience is not a formal selection criterion, but committee members do consider it an important criterion in the selection of early career researchers. In most institutions committee members connect international mobility to candidates’ perceived excellence. So next to precarious working conditions and limited prospects of a stable academic career, early career researchers are expected to spend part of their employment across country borders. This might further their precariousness even more as moving abroad comes with (additional) instability as well as personal risks (Richardson and Zikic 2007).

A committee member in the STEM department in Iceland argues that going abroad is “sort of an unwritten rule”. When this requirement remains tacit, as is the case in most departments, applicants can suffer from this lack of transparency by being rejected for not fulfilling the criterion. Icelandic SSH research participants confirm that international mobility of staff trained at their university

is considered important and perceived as a qualifier, however it is not a decisive criterion.

Overall, we find that the criterion of international mobility is more pronounced and more decisive in the STEM departments. In the Dutch STEM department, international postdoc experience is a formal selection criterion for assistant professor positions. The recruitment protocol articulates this criterion as: “Some years of postdoc experience, also abroad”. In Switzerland it is an institutional obligation for candidates who received their PhDs from that same university to have spent at least one year abroad during their postdoc. In Italy, a formal criterion for assistant professorships is to have spent at least one year of doctoral or post-doctoral research abroad, yet, candidates who lack this experience are also considered for assistant professorships.

Because in most countries the criterion of international mobility is not formalised or specified, uncertainties and ambiguities emerge in the criterion’s application. This leaves room for committee members to select candidates based on their interpretations of the concept.

Because they’re clear but not detailed criteria, it’s obvious that there are interpretative sensitivities of various types. I’ll give you a banal example. We all agree that international activity is important, but what is meant by international activity? Does it mean having been frequently abroad? Having taught abroad? Having published in foreign journals? Or does it mean staying at home but being part of international networks, and so on and so forth?

(IT, STEM, M)

The quote reveals that “international activity” can encompass many endeavours and that the committee member does not know what can be interpreted as international activity and what does not count as such. Because various committee members have multiple interpretations of the criterion due to a lack of definition, they can apply it at their discretion.

Even though some committee members argued that the mobility criterion is difficult to meet for all early career researchers, most research participants throughout the countries and disciplines in our study expect that women researchers have a harder time fulfilling the international mobility criterion because of family or motherhood responsibilities. Committee members’ assumptions about women’s decreased mobility can influence their evaluations of women candidates because they anticipate that women cannot fulfil the requirement. Therefore, they practice gender when applying the criterion of international mobility.

For example, Italian committee members argued that women researchers will have to renounce part of their mobility in order to care for their child(ren). Men, on the contrary, are never mentioned in relation to family and children, so research participants assume that they will continue with their work and career plans regardless of their family status. This is similar in the Slovenian SSH

department where two women research participants noted that living abroad should not be required from young female researchers at the beginning of their career, when they may have small children. An interviewee explains:

A woman has difficulty to go abroad with her family. Her husband is not ready enough to go with her; he will be ridiculed by the social environment. In Slovenia that is less acceptable, if we want to confess it or not.

(SO, SSH, F)

The committee member argues that women with families experience difficulties going abroad, which she relates to the Slovenian “social environment”. She states that the environment will most likely not accept and even “ridicule” men going abroad with their partners. In the interview she continues speaking about the criterion of international work experience and wonders: “why don’t we think of some alternative?”. This implies that the criterion is fixed and that alternative ways of meeting the criterion are not used in the interviewees’ work environment.

A STEM committee member in the Netherlands also considers the required mobility of early career researchers a reason for the small number of women in his field and links this to family circumstances:

INTERVIEWEE: But I think that is the big problem. Yes, the whole system how you get such a job, right? You cannot plan it and say: Now you do a postdoc there. And then I will become full professor there. It is more of a random walk. You get a postdoc position there, then you get your second position in another country. And then finally you get a [permanent] job, but this is maybe in a third country, right? Or at least not in the same city. And if then both, men, women have a job, it is going to be very, very difficult of course. And if you go in such a random walk through the entire world, or at least Europe. And I think that is one of the reasons why we do not have so many women.

INTERVIEWER: And how do you mean that? Because they can allow that randomness less?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes. But I think there is no solution. We want candidates who have that international experience. It is expected that they do a postdoc here and there and then this random component is inherent. And yes, that is of course very hard to combine with a family.

(NL, STEM, M)

The interviewee calls the career system in academia “a random walk” that demands multiple moves across positions and countries. He thinks women are less able to deal with this “random” component because for women (and not men) mobility is “of course very hard to combine with a family”. This interviewee puts the responsibility of meeting the international experience criterion on the (women) candidates, as he argues “there is no solution” for the (women)

candidates who do not meet that criterion, as the requirement prescribes to do “a postdoc here and there”. He treats the criterion as a strict demand and does not acknowledge alternative ways of obtaining international experience, such as short research stays abroad or international collaborations. The interviewee considers the system as the problem without being reflexive about his own position within this system as someone involved in the construction of selection criteria and thus as someone who can apply criteria less rigidly and strict.

Academic citizenship. A fourth and final specific gender practice connected to the general gender practice of assessing potential for excellence is the request for academic citizens. In the previous sections, we showed that an ideal candidate for assistant professor positions is constructed primarily as an excellent researcher who is competitive, productive, and confident. However, our data reveal that most committee members do not want these characteristics to carry too far because they want to hire a candidate who is a collaborative team player, an academic citizen, too. We find implicit gender connotations in the tacit criterion of academic citizenship.

We build on teamwork. Of course, individual scientific excellence is important for us, but as our ambition is to build a strong and prosperous research group, we consider the social dimension – sociability of the researcher – an important dimension as well. Someone who has problems working in a group despite being scientifically excellent can break the team. Therefore, sometimes we accept a person, that is not so scientifically excellent, but a socially intelligent individual, since our ambition is to build a strong team.

(SO, SSH, F)

According to this committee member “individual scientific excellence” is important in her group but the “social dimension” seems even more important. She argues that a candidate who is scientifically excellent however not able to work in the team will not be hired. On the contrary, someone who is not scientifically excellent but “a socially intelligent individual” can be hired. She emphasises the team component that seems decisive in hiring decisions.

Interestingly, many committee members throughout the various countries and disciplines consider scientific excellence and teamwork as two opposite characteristics that cannot be held by one and the same person. We find that committee members consider “a whiz kid with a super impact factor” (CH, SSH, F) incompatible with being “a good colleague” because they argue that whiz kids are “wrapped up in [their] own thing” (CH, SSH, M). A Swiss research participant refers to this as a “paradox” which reflects an opposition between the requirement of individual development in the area of research and the desire of a team for collaboration. Or as a Belgian interviewee argued: “there are two types of researchers/academics: there is the collaborator and the individualist” (BE, SSH, M).

Moreover, research participants suggest that being excellent in research not only restricts collaboration but also resembles having a problematic character.

They argue that “brilliant researchers” are “very difficult to work” with (BE, SSH, M) as they cannot “work with others” and have “a difficult character” (CH, SSH, F). We notice that this stereotypical image is connected to researchers who are extremely productive. Moreover, this stereotypical belief causes committee members to look at “brilliant researchers” with suspicion.

We find that committee members construct the criterion ‘collaboration’ as important in selection decisions, even though this criterion often remains tacit and non-formalised. When committee members speak about situations where they will actually hire someone, they prefer a candidate who is a so-called ‘academic citizen’, someone who contributes to the ‘housework’ of the department (Heijstra *et al.* 2016). Thus, early career researchers are expected to demonstrate loyalty to the department, but they seem to receive little guarantee for permanence in return. In our data we found that the value of collaboration is often ascribed to women candidates but not to men.

Outside of here I know a lot of people, men, who, when you ask them to collaborate, reply: “No, I don’t collaborate, I compete”. I’ve never heard a woman say that. [...] You could imagine science becoming more collaborative [when an interactive web tool is implemented in science] and women getting on much better in that, and men being pissed off because they find it hard to show off their egos.

(CH, STEM, M)

According to this committee member, men want to compete rather than collaborate. On the contrary, he portrays women as collaborative. He predicts that when science becomes “more collaborative” in the future, women will succeed “much better” than men. Yet, this also implies that science is not there yet, and that it is still more competitive based. Most committee members throughout the countries and disciplines argue that women have better relational skills and are more prone towards collaboration. This suggests that women candidates may score higher on the criterion of academic citizenship than men candidates.

Overall, the concern of hiring a colleague with whom it will be possible or even pleasant to cooperate, rather than the scientific best candidate, was found throughout the countries. Because committee members perceive women candidates as more collaborative and relational, the academic citizenship criterion could benefit women during selection procedures. However, such stereotypical expectations can also work against women when they do not display the prescribed feminine behaviour (Rudman and Phelan 2008), possibly invoking bias in the evaluation of women candidates.

In summary, in the assessment of potential for excellence, committee members base their judgements on limited track records of candidates for assistant professor positions and therefore they rely heavily on tacit criteria. They predict the future potential of candidates for surviving in the academic world, a gender practice that is conflated with multiple specific gender practices. Committee members perceive a lack of confidence and commitment as well as

limited international mobility opportunities for women early career researchers and by doing so render women less suitable for assistant professor positions. This makes the position of women early career researchers more precarious than that of their male counterparts. We found that only the criterion of academic citizenship could work to the advantage of women candidates. But, being evaluated as an academic citizen depends on the department at hand and thus might not help in securing a permanent position on the long run.

Discussion and conclusion

Despite a “veneer of equality” (Teelken and Deem 2013, p. 520) our critical comparative analysis revealed two general and six specific gender practices in the recruitment and selection of temporary assistant professors throughout six European countries and both STEM and SSH disciplines. The gender practices are subtle yet omnipresent in the constructions of recruitment and selection practices of men and women committee members. We found that gender practices are rather similarly over the various countries and disciplines. Our study sheds light on the gender practices present in selection criteria that affect aspiring young researchers’ entrance to precarious assistant professor positions. Even though non-tenured assistant professorships are precarious in nature because of its temporality and insecurity, we found that committee members assess candidates’ potential to succeed in academia in the long run. Therefore, temporary assistant professorships, which could possibly lead to a more permanent position, are distinct from casual or hourly paid academic positions that often do not create chances for leaving precarious employment. We contribute to theories of gender in academic organisations by uncovering the complex interconnections of gender practices and recruitment and selection practices for early career researchers where judgements are based on potential. We have illustrated multiple gender practices, some beneficial and others detrimental for women academics. Furthermore, we identified three discrepancies in the various criteria and their application that we will elaborate on in this section.

We showed how gender practices relating to welcoming women might work to the benefit of women candidates for assistant professor positions. Yet, we found a first discrepancy when analysing the tacit selection criteria used in the assessment of early career researchers. In their discourses and reflections on women in academia, committee members argue that they want to have more women in their department in order to get a more balanced staff composition. Even though most of them do not seem to take up an active role in increasing the number of women researchers, they do give arguments for why they think science or their departments would benefit from more women colleagues. Reflexively most committee members express this wish for hiring more women. However, welcoming women seems more a general principle than an actual practice because in committee members’ construction of tacit criteria they unreflexively portray women as less competent for what they call the competitive academic world. Committee members discursively construct women academics

as lacking necessary survival skills such as confidence, commitment and international mobility, which can render women candidates as unsuitable for academia. Committee members reproduce the image of an ideal candidate that resembles a traditional masculine profile. In line with Van den Brink and Stobbe (2014) and Bleijenbergh and colleagues (2013) we found that although our research participants say they value (some) feminine qualities, the image of the ideal early career researcher fits men and masculinity more.

In their accounts, committee members predominantly depict their ideal candidate for assistant professorships as an excellent researcher who has the potential to survive in the competitive academic world by being productive, confident, committed to the profession, and internationally mobile. This profile resembles the Olympus model that “situates the scientists [...] at the top of the pyramid, far removed from the concerns of everyday life” (Brouns 2004, p. 151). However, we also found that when committee members talk about their recruitment and selection practices, they state that hiring excellent academics can disadvantage team dynamics, as they tend to construct excellence as incompatible with and the opposite of collaborative. A second discrepancy is thus constructed between the criteria of excellence and academic citizenship. Several research participants argue that they consider teamwork of such importance that they would rather hire an early career researcher who is somewhat less excellent but a good, collaborative colleague. This implies that there are committee members who prefer the Agora model of science, which is not focused exclusively on the production of knowledge for the scientific community but also aims at creating an inspiring intellectual work climate based on other principles such as exchange (Brouns 2001; Benschop and Brouns 2003). The Agora model is supposed to fit a traditional feminine behavioural repertoire more (Benschop and Brouns 2003). We showed how being a collaborator and a good colleague seems to indeed fit the (stereotypical) image of women researchers better, according to our research participants. Yet, our findings imply that overall the individual competition criteria that fit the neoliberal Olympus model seem to prevail over the exchange criteria of the Agora model.

A third discrepancy we found is between the welcoming stances towards hiring more women academics and committee members’ ostensible unwillingness to change or look for alternative ways of defining selection criteria. Committee members generally construct selection criteria as if they are etched in stone. Such practices safeguard committee members from any responsibility. Even research participants in power positions argue that they could not change criteria, as they have to abide by the rules and regulations defined by either the faculty board or the university board. None of the research participants seem to want or to perceive themselves able to change the recruitment and selection criteria for assistant professor positions. Therefore, our study shows that selection criteria are socially constructed, subjective, and fluid, yet, committee members present the criteria as ‘common-sense’, taken for granted criteria in selection decisions (Van den Brink and Benschop 2012a) without reflecting on their own role in the construction of these criteria. Furthermore, our findings reveal that

committee members have no or limited awareness of the gendered construction of selection criteria and the consequences nor do they reflect on their gendered assumptions about the qualities of women candidates. Hardly anyone questioned or challenged the current academic system or the beliefs that an academic career requires long hours, devotion, confidence, and competition. Neither did committee members contemplate the responsibility of others beside women to deal with possible difficulties. They put the responsibility of solving gender inequalities on the individual woman researcher making women responsible for limited success in acquiring assistant professor positions. This adds to women researchers' precariousness who, in the increased competition for jobs, are made responsible for fighting the stereotypical images that committee members hold. This logic fits the neoliberal postfeminist ideal, which epitomises 'self-responsibility' for women's own lives and careers (Rottenberg 2014) "without questioning the underlying masculine and capitalist norms of that ideal" (Benschop and Verloo 2016, p. 102).

We conclude that a few gender practices can be beneficial for women academics. However, these practices around welcoming women and the alleged collaborative qualities of female academic citizens, portray women as different from men, convey generic ideas of women, and reproduce feminine characteristics as innate or essential (Crompton and Lyonette 2005). Therefore, we question whether these 'beneficial' practices are strong enough to drive change. We have seen that the detrimental practices around assessing potential and constructing an ideal, confident, committed and international mobile early career researcher are so ubiquitous that they predominantly affect evaluations in the competition for assistant professor positions. This can cause committee members to make biased selection decisions, attributing more potential to male researchers. As a result, women researchers can be excluded from the competition, which can lead them to be forced into longer periods of job insecurity and a lack of career prospects.

In conclusion, gender practices in the recruitment and selection at the early stage of academic careers show how tacit criteria are more decisive and that assessments of potential are particularly perilous for women. Overall, many committee members depict women as non-competitive, modest, non-committed, and non-mobile, which hampers women's career development and impedes their escape from precariousness. Future research could examine how these generic ideas affect individual women applicants, by studying the literal practicing of gender on the spot, for example during selection committee deliberations.

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